

Sterling Open Space and Recreation Plan: 2019 Update Summary

Section 1: Executive Summary. This section contains a one-page summary of the revised Plan and states the four primary goals endorsed by the Plan: (1) encouraging responsible protection and stewardship of publicly accessible lands; (2) enhancing athletic fields and other recreation facilities; (3) improving communication among town boards and departments concerning open space and recreational issues; (4) identifying new approaches to town zoning and planning that affect open space and recreational needs.

Section 2: Introduction. This section describes our reasons for updating the Plan after the previous update in 2010, lists accomplishments since the 2010 Plan update, and outlines the several steps that went into the current planning process, including public participation.

Section 3: Community Setting. This section begins with a description of Sterling’s “regional context,” goes on to outline the town’s history, and surveys changes in population since the previous Plan was formulated in 2010. It also offers a group portrait of current residents, including their age, educational attainment, patterns of employment, and income. It then analyzes prospects for growth and development, both short-term and long-term, and concludes by noting the constraints of water resources on Sterling’s growth potential.

Section 4: Environmental & Recreational Inventory and Analysis. This section, the longest, surveys the physical setting of the town: its geography, topography, soil composition, water resources, vegetation, fisheries, and wildlife. It notes that nearly 34% of Sterling’s land (approximately 6,700 of the town’s 20,000+ acres) is protected from development, due chiefly to acquisition by the state to protect the Wachusett Reservoir. Environmental challenges include water conservation, combatting invasive species such as the Asian Long-horned beetle, managing hazardous waste sites, and chronic flooding, eased since the summer of 2020 through actions by the state. The section concludes with an inventory of town recreational programs for both children and adults.

Section 5: Inventory of Lands of Conservation and Recreation. This section outlines the natural resources available to the town and notes the pressures for development, especially on the east side of town, due to Sterling’s proximity to the I-495 corridor. Climate change is also listed as a challenge. The hiking trails developed and maintained by OSIC are described. This description is followed by a complete list of land parcels under DCR protection as well as private properties with conservation restrictions and open space with partial or temporary restrictions. The section concludes with recreation property information and the status of handicap access for Parks and Recreation and Conservation Commission lands.

Section 6: Community Vision. In this section the process employed to determine community values and wishes is outlined, and the four major goals mentioned in the executive summary are restated: (1) encouraging responsible protection and stewardship of publicly accessible

lands; (2) enhancing athletic fields and other recreation facilities; (3) improving communication among town boards and departments concerning open space and recreational issues; (4) identifying new approaches to town zoning and planning that affect open space and recreational needs.

Section 7: Analysis of Needs. This section provides an overview of recent development trends in Massachusetts and underscores the need to preserve and protect open space and wildlife habitat in Sterling. Particularly vulnerable is the approximately one third of town land that is currently being farmed. (Once farmland is sold for development, the update notes, it can be considered lost for good.) Development schemes such as cluster housing may offer a solution, but this will necessitate a revision of the town's zoning laws. Hiking or walking is the top priority of Sterling residents, whose wishes do not align in all points with with the Massachusetts Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP). The section concludes with a summary of recreation fields and notes the importance of a Recreation Center to meet town needs.

Section 8: Goals and Objectives. This section restates the four primary goals and objectives presented in Sections 1 & 6.

Section 9: Seven-Year Action Plan. This section details specific actions recommended to be taken in order to attain the four major goals and objectives over the next seven years, with a table that links each with the parties responsible for implementation, possible funding sources, and the year in which the actions should be undertaken.

Section 10: Public Comments: There are currently no public comments.

Section 11: References. 99 references are listed here, ranging from previous Open Space and Recreation Plans to input from consultants, state agencies, scientific studies, and public reports.

Section 12: Appendices. This section contains 9 maps, including a formal hiking trail inventory; data on public participation in developing the 2019 OSRP Update; Sterling's ADA self-evaluation; and a list of Conservation Commission properties.